irn
industrial relations news

IRN Conference 2026

DATE Thursday, March 12th, 2026

START 8.50am sharp

VENUE Croke Park, Dublin

SOLD OUT

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Beyond the Familiar:

Rethinking employment practices in 2026

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We are delighted to invite you to the annual Industrial Relations News Conference – the premier industrial relations and employment law event in Ireland.

As Ireland prepares for its EU Presidency in 2026, it faces pressure on many fronts. Traditional approaches are in the spotlight as employment practitioners, managing existing challenges, has to prepare for coming change. Employment relations in Ireland has a new focus under the Action Plan for Collective Bargaining, while new employment rules, such as pay transparency, upend tradition. All of this comes in a fraught geopolitical context which compels Ireland to change approaches that have remained settled for many years.

IRN Conference 2026 will focus on reassessing the world of work today, covering the following topics:

- Private sector pay and employment practices
- Collective bargaining and Ireland's Action Plan
- Ireland's Defence Forces
- Hybrid Working
- Neurodiversity in the workplace
- Employment relations in the USA
- The McCann FitzGerald employment law overview

The former European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, will also deliver a keynote speech at IRN Conference 2026.

Workplace relations practitioners are operating in a very dynamic environment, making it all the more imperative to keep up to date and connect with experts and peers at IRN Conference 2026.

The IRN Conference is chaired by journalist and broadcaster, Claire Brock.

Morning

8.00: *Registration & Tea/Coffee*

8.50: *Conference opens*

9.00: **IRN/CIPD PAY AND EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES SURVEY 2026**

MEG DUNPHY, HR POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT MANAGER AT CIPD IRELAND, will present the findings of the 2026 IRN-CIPD pay and employment practices survey. Marking its 14th year, the joint survey of IRN subscribers and CIPD members is a trusted and informative source on pay and employment trends in Ireland.

09.30: **COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND IRELAND'S ACTION PLAN**

Industrial relations has a new focal point in the Government's Action Plan on Collective Bargaining. **JOHN KING,** SIPTU GENERAL SECRETARY (DESIGNATE), **PAULINE O'HARE,** SENIOR LEGAL DIRECTOR, IBEC and **DR VALENTINA PAOLUCCI,** LECTURER AT MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, will discuss the action plan and other key aspects of Irish industrial relations in 2026.

10.00: **TEA & COFFEE/NETWORKING**

10.20: **IRELAND'S DEFENCE FORCES**

As Ireland's defence capabilities come under increasing scrutiny, **GERARD GUINAN,** PDFORRA GENERAL SECRETARY, and **CONOR KING,** RACO GENERAL SECRETARY will discuss IR issues in the Defence Forces. Also speaking on the panel will be **THOMAS BYRNE TD,** MINISTER OF STATE AT THE DEPARTMENTS OF TAOISEACH, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, WITH SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR EUROPEAN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE, and **DONNACHA Ó BEACHÁIN,** PROFESSOR OF POLITICS AT DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY.

11.00: ***KEYNOTE:* EMILY O'REILLY**

The FORMER EUROPEAN OMBUDSMAN **EMILY O'REILLY** will give a keynote speech, which will include her views on how EU regulation can impact working life in Ireland.

11.30: **McCANN FITZGERALD'S EMPLOYMENT LAW OVERVIEW**

DONAL HAMILTON, PARTNER, McCANN FITZGERALD EMPLOYMENT, PENSIONS AND INCENTIVES GROUP and **DAVID MCCAULEY,** SENIOR ASSOCIATE, McCANN FITZGERALD EMPLOYMENT, PENSIONS AND INCENTIVES GROUP, will discuss the major

themes and recent developments in employment law and analyse recent high-profile employment decisions of the WRC, Labour Court and the Superior Courts, with a guide to what practitioners should focus on over the coming year.

12.30: **LUNCH**

Afternoon

13.30: EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN THE USA

LYNN RHINEHART, ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE, and **RICK WARTERS**, EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS EXPERT, will discuss employment relations and collective bargaining in the USA; the differences across the Atlantic; and any lessons that can be drawn for practitioners in Ireland. This panel discussion will be chaired by WRITER AND IR COMMENTATOR, **TOM HAYES**.

14.10: HYBRID WORKING

Hybrid working continues to be a dominant workplace relations issue. **MARY BRASSIL,** PARTNER AND HEAD OF THE EMPLOYMENT GROUP, MCCANN FITZGERALD, **NICHOLA HARKIN,** HEAD OF EMPLOYMENT LAW SERVICES, Ibec and **ÉAMONN DONNELLY,** FÓRSA DEPUTY GENERAL SECRETARY, will discuss the legal and practical matters for practitioners to consider.

14.40: NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Neuroinclusion is gaining momentum as a progressive workplace policy. **DAVE CORMACK,** ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AT THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF IRELAND**, EMILY HARNETT,** HEAD OF MARKETING AT CODEX IRELAND, and **SHARON DILLON-LYONS BL** will discuss neurodiversity amongst the workforce, with a focus on awareness & training, legal obligations and practical solutions.

15.10: *Conference close*

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IRN Conference 2026 March12th Croke Park, Dublin

Beyond the Familiar: Rethinking employment practices in 2026

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about the speakers

MARY BRASSIL is **Partner and Head of the Employment Group, McCann FitzGerald**. Mary advises public and private sector organisations on all aspects of the employment relationship, and has extensive experience advising on complex employee relations issues, workplace investigations as well as the management of protected disclosures. She is expert in the employment law issues that arise on corporate transactions and restructurings, as well as outsourcings and redundancy situations. Mary represents clients before the WRC and the Labour Court and advises organisations on industrial relations matters. Mary is a member of the European Employment Lawyers Association and writes and lectures widely on all topics relating to her practice area.

DAVE CORMACK is an **Assistant Professor in the School of Business at the National College of Ireland and a visiting lecturer at the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities**. During his MBA studies with The Open University, Dave was diagnosed with dyslexia, an experience that inspired his strong commitment to neuro-inclusion. He is an active advocate in this field and has designed and delivers a master's-level micro-credential, Harnessing Neurodiversity in the Modern Workplace. Before transitioning fully into academia, Dave spent three decades in the technology sector, working with organisations such as the EMC Corporation and Telecom Éireann/eircom.

ÉAMONN DONNELLY is **Deputy General Secretary and Director of Industrial Relations of Ireland's largest public sector union, Fórsa**, and head of the union's Civil Service division, representing more than 25,000 civil servants. He also serves on the ICTU Executive Council. Éamonn began his career as a clerical officer in Dublin Corporation, becoming active in the union before joining IMPACT as an industrial relations officer in 1999. Following Fórsa's formation in 2018, Éamonn was head of the union's Health & Welfare division, where his team worked closely with the HSE and the Department of Health throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. A lifelong and ardent fan of Arsenal, Dublin GAA, and The Who, he also performs regularly with his band, *The Rods & Mockers*.

MEG DUNPHY is **HR Policy and Engagement Manager at CIPD Ireland**. Meg is an experienced HR professional with a background in HR Business Partner roles across the Irish public sector and global enterprises. As HR Policy and Engagement Manager at CIPD, she drives value for members and the wider HR community through key events, learning initiatives, research, and thought leadership. Passionate about the power of the people profession, she delivers key insights that influence HR practitioners and the broader business community

GERARD GUINAN is **PDFORRA General Secretary.** He has been a member of the Defence Forces since 1989 and was seconded to the Association in 2011 to act as a Regional Liaison Officer. He has been the lead negotiator for PDFORRA since 2017 when he took up the position of General Secretary. He has a background in law, having lectured part time in both Athlone and Carlow Institutes from 2006 until 2014. He has submitted a number of successful complaints on behalf of his members to the ESRC on issues such as Freedom of Association and collective bargaining and most recently on overtime payments and pay for public holidays. He currently sits on the Board of EUROMIL.

DONAL HAMILTON is **Partner, McCann FitzGerald Employment, Pensions and Incentives Group**. Donal advises domestic and international employers on all aspects of the employment relationship, and has extensive experience advising on business transfer and outsourcing issues, corporate immigration, complex employee relations issues, and employment investigations, disputes and mediation. He also represents clients before the WRC and Labour Court and advises organisations on complex industrial relations and contentious employment matters, including the management of protected disclosures and the resolution of subsequent litigation.

NICHOLA HARKIN is **Head of Employment Law Services at Ibec**. Nichola joined Ibec's Employment Law Services Unit in 2015 having worked in private practice for a number of years. During this time Nichola has advised member companies on the full spectrum of employment law matters, represented them before the Workplace Relations Commission and Labour Court, and has engaged with policy makers both at a national and EU level. Nichola is a graduate of University College Dublin, where she obtained a Bachelor of Civil Laws (BCL) (International) degree and the London School of Economics, where she obtained a Masters of Law (LLM) (Employment Law). She was appointed Head of Employment Law Services in January 2022.

TOM HAYES is a **writer and commentator on European and Irish industrial relations**. Previously, he was the Executive Director of BEERG, the Brussels European Employee Relations Group. He started his labour relations career in 1972 with the Workers Union of Ireland, now part of SIPTU, before spending some time in HR with a number of US-based multinationals. Since the early 1980s, he has been a consultant specialising in European-level employee relations.

Lt Col CONOR KING is **RACO General Secretary**. Conor is an Army Officer with over 27 years' service in the Irish Defence Forces. He has been the General Secretary of the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO) since 01 January 2019. He has served in a variety of appointments at Unit, Formation and Defence Forces HQ level (HR and Strategic Planning Branches) as well as overseas in missions in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa. He has also worked as a Senior Auditor with the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (while on secondment). His academic qualifications include a Master of Business Studies Degree in Human Resource Management (University of Limerick) and a Master of Science in Business (Leadership & Management Practice) from UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School.

about the speakers continued

JOHN KING is **SIPTU General Secretary (designate)**. Elected Deputy General Secretary (DGS) of SIPTU for Public Service in 2017, Mr King will take up the General Secretary role in 2026. He was SIPTU's senior negotiator on the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Public Service Committee, which negotiated two Building Momentum Public Service Agreements 2020-2023 and the current Public Service Agreement 2024-2026. He has 37 years' service with SIPTU with extensive experience representing the interests of members across the private, public, and community sectors in both the Republic and Northern Ireland.

DAVID McCAULEY is **Senior Associate, McCann FitzGerald Employment, Pensions and Incentives Group**. David advises private and public sector clients on both contentious and non-contentious aspects of employment law, with extensive experience advising clients before the WRC, Labour Court and Superior Courts, as well as through mediation. David regularly advises on complex employment investigations, processes and disputes, in particular in the area of protected disclosures, as well as corporate restructurings, business transfers, outsourcings and redundancy situations. David writes widely on employment law and is a committee member of the Employment Law Association of Ireland.

DONNACHA Ó BEACHÁIN is **Professor of Politics at Dublin City University**, where he lectures on post-Soviet politics, de facto states, and foreign policy. Over a distinguished career, he has combined extensive publications, media commentary, and advisory roles to deliver rigorous, evidence-based analysis on some of the world's most complex geopolitical challenges. During the last quarter-century, he has conducted research across all fifteen post-Soviet states and in multiple protracted conflict zones, including a decade living and working in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Moldova. Professor Ó Beacháin is the author of several books, including his most recent work, Unfinished Empire: Russian Imperialism in Ukraine and the Near Abroad (2025).

PAULINE O'HARE is **Senior Legal Director at Ibec**. Pauline O'Hare is a graduate of UCD, where she obtained a Bachelor of Civil Laws degree and a Masters in Commercial Law, before qualifying as a solicitor in February 2006. Pauline previously worked in private practice before joining Ibec's Employment Law Services team in 2008. Pauline specialises in employment law and industrial relations and engages with key stakeholders on policy matters at both a national and EU level and was a member of the technical working group for the Action Plan on Collective Bargaining.

EMILY O'REILLY is **former European Ombudsman**. Emily is an author and former journalist and broadcaster and has served in key public positions in Ireland and Europe over the last two decades. Emily became Ireland's first female Ombudsman and Information Commissioner in 2003. She was voted European Ombudsman by the European Parliament in 2013 and served two terms, to 2024.She was educated at University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, and Harvard University, where she was awarded a Nieman Fellowship in journalism, and has worked at RTÉ and Today FM.

EMILY HARNETT has been the **Head of Marketing at Codex** since 2019. In 2025, she led the company's neuroinclusion initiative, including research, partnership with AsIAm and product launch of Thrive collection. Her approach centres on practical change—policy, leadership behaviours, and everyday workplace design—grounded in empathy and collaboration. As a speaker, Emily is known for her honest, thoughtful perspective and her ability to connect strategy with real human impact. She speaks passionately about neuroinclusion, inclusive leadership, and the role organisations play in building workplaces where everyone can do their best work.

Dr VALENTINA PAOLUCCI is a **Lecturer at Maynooth University School of Business**, specialising in employment relations, trade union revitalisation, and labour market regulation. Her research examines how collective bargaining and institutional frameworks shape working conditions, with particular focus on flexibility, precarious work, and pay coordination across Europe. She has conducted multi-level comparative analyses in Ireland, Italy, Denmark, and the UK. She currently leads the EuCoBarg consortium for Eurofound's EU-wide project "Promoting collective bargaining – lessons from the past and the determinants of collective bargaining coverage" and also serves as an External Expert for Eurofound.

LYNN RHINEHART is **Senior Fellow at the Economic Policy Institute**, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. Lynn is a Washington, D.C.-based labor lawyer and labor policy expert. Lynn served as Senior Counselor to U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh and Acting Secretary Julie Su on issues relating to unions and collective bargaining during the Biden Administration. Until July 2018, Lynn was General Counsel of the national AFL-CIO, a federation of 64 national and international labor unions representing 15 million working people. She is a Senior Fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

RICK WARTERS is retired, now **researching and writing on history and labour relations**. Rick joined United Technologies Corp. [UTC] after graduating from Cornell University, USA. Over the next 35 years, he negotiated successful labour outcomes in the aerospace, automotive, and building systems industries during decades defined by intense globalization. Rick spent the last nine years of his corporate career leading global employee and labor relations for UTC's 240,000 employees at Pratt & Whitney, Collins Aerospace, Carrier, and Otis.